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ABSTRACT

Middle schools embrace exploration as a guiding principle across the school curriculum. Noting that the research on exploratory courses is sparse, this digest discusses what is known about exploratory curriculum in middle schools. The digest first looks at the role of exploratory curriculum, pointing out that the purpose of exploratory courses is to offer wide-ranging opportunities for middle school students. Exploratory courses such as drama, foreign language, music, art, health, life skills, and technology provide young adolescents with experiences in areas beyond the core subjects. While many schools have focused on exploration through separate classes, mini-courses, activity programs, and other student activities, some schools have made their entire curriculum exploratory. In addition to describing different types of exploratory courses and programs, the digest notes that exploratory programs are varied in two other key ways--who selects the exploratory offerings and how long they last. The digest also explores issues involved in implementing exploratory courses, including how exploratory courses relate to other core courses, how core and exploratory teachers communicate, how or whether to grade exploratory courses, and which exploratory courses should be offered. The digest concludes with suggestions for middle schools implementing exploratory curriculum, ensuring that everyone understands that exploratory and academic are complementary, not competing or opposing concepts. (Contains 11 references.) (LPP)

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Exploratory Curriculum in the Middle School

Ed Brazee

Exploration of students' "specialized interests, aptitudes, and abilities as a basis for decisions regarding educational opportunities" and vocational decisions was long ago identified as one of the essential functions of the junior high school (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947, pp. 31-32). In 1995, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) reaffirmed the importance of exploration, calling for a "curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory" (1995, pp. 20-24). In both instances, exploration was meant to apply to the entire curriculum. In practice, in the junior high school and especially in the middle level school, the goal of exploration has been interpreted most often as a set of separate "exploratory" courses such as art, music, technology, and family and consumer science (George, 2000/2001). Many schools also include clubs, activities, and mini-courses under the exploratory banner.

Exploration is important for young adolescents because it ensures hands-on, participatory, meaningful, and engaging experiences. It has endured because it meets the most fundamental of middle level concepts—it is developmentally responsive and academically challenging. While many books on middle level education speak favorably about exploratory courses as a key component in middle level schools, the research on most aspects of "exploration" is sparse, focusing on frequency of offerings rather than on student or teacher responses to programs (Bergman, 1992).

The Role of Exploratory Curriculum

The middle school curriculum has traditionally included both core and exploratory courses. Core courses generally include language arts, social studies, science, mathematics, and sometimes reading. Exploratory courses such as drama, foreign language, music, art, health, life skills, and technology provide young adolescents with experiences in areas beyond the core subjects. In some schools, exploratory courses and experiences are simply referred to as "exploratories"; in others, they are called related arts, allied arts, unified arts, encore courses (to distinguish them from core courses), or specials.

For many students, middle school may be the last opportunity to explore new subjects and interests, the last time to learn to play the flute, learn to speak Spanish, or learn to cook a new dish.

Another benefit for many students is that exploratory courses such as art, drama, and technology actively engage students, allowing them to learn new skills and try out new ways of thinking. The purpose of exploratory courses, whatever the label and whatever the content, is to offer wide-ranging opportunities and experiences that students would not otherwise have.

Exploration across the Curriculum

While many schools have focused on exploration through separate classes, mini-courses, activity programs, and other student activities, some schools have made their entire curriculum exploratory. An NMSA position paper (1995, pp. 23-24) states that there are three earmarks of an exploratory program. First, an exploratory program enables students to discover their particular abilities, talents, interests, values, and preferences. This self-knowledge helps students to prepare for adult life, not only in terms of vocation, but also as family members and citizens. Second, courses and activities are taught so as to reveal opportunities for making contributions to society. Finally, exploratory experiences acquaint students with enriching, healthy leisure-time pursuits, such as lifetime physical activities, involvement in the arts, and social service. Looked at in this way, opportunities exist for all areas of the middle level curriculum to be exploratory.

Exploratory Courses—Options and Opportunities

In some schools, exploratory offerings are holdovers from vocational training days—home economics and industrial arts, as well as art and a foreign language (Van Til et al., 1967). In other schools, these types of courses may be combined with other special courses or activities into an activity period including short or mini-courses. Offerings such as line dancing, calligraphy, soccer, and board games, which are used as a way to break up the academic day, give students an opportunity to work with peers and teachers (and sometimes parents or community volunteers) and give both teachers and students chances to work in areas of high interest to each. In other schools, more academically focused courses such as creative writing, mythology, or public speaking are offered outside the regular day and are included as exploratory offerings. Still other schools develop extensive classes such as "create a museum" and the "art of living" that complement a school's regular curriculum (Wayne, 2000).

Exploratory programs are varied in two other key ways—who selects the exploratory offerings and how long they last. Some schools encourage students to select from different options, some have required electives with little or no choice, and some work to gradually introduce choice to students as they progress through their middle school years. Length of time for each of these options varies as well. Some schools may offer and some students may choose short courses meeting once or twice a week; others may elect a course for a trimester or semester and then switch for the next term. Some schools devote an entire day to exploratory activities once a month (Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990).

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Issues in Implementing Exploratory Curriculum

Teachers have concerns about how exploratory courses relate to other core courses, how core and exploratory teachers communicate, and how or whether to grade exploratories. What exploratory courses should be offered? How do exploratory courses support core courses, and how do core courses support exploratory courses? In short, what should constitute the middle school curriculum? Too often, in their zeal to offer a wide variety of courses, administrators and teachers offer too many different courses for short time periods, which result in students being "exposed" but leaving little time for true exploration of a subject. To combat this problem, some schools focus on fewer courses for longer periods of time.

Another problem is the lack of communication and collaboration between core and exploratory teachers. Since exploratory teachers most often form their own teams, they may be excluded from essential decision making and discussions by the academic teams. Doda and George (1999) suggest options through extended teams where exploratory teachers serve as representatives on academic teams, rotating team connections, core-exploratory liaisons, and connections through homebase/advisory alliances.

Should exploratory courses/experiences be graded? Some teachers think that grades do not support the exploratory nature of the experience and may inhibit students' willingness to try new experiences. Unfortunately, some students and parents subscribe to the idea that without a grade, an exploratory course has little value. Some middle schools include exploratory courses in grade averages while others do not, because they feel not including exploratory course grades promotes more nonthreatening participation in new experiences. With more emphasis on state and national standards, high-stakes testing, and assessment, nearly every middle school is feeling pressure to use its time to optimum advantage. At the middle level, this pressure often translates into fewer exploratory courses or new "exploratory" courses that offer less exploration and look more like the usual school subjects (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Future Directions

Exploratory experiences in middle schools are more important than ever for young adolescents. The current emphasis on standards and testing should not limit students' opportunities to pursue varied interests and build on their strengths. Given current expectations and conditions in middle schools, there are at least three major directions for middle schools in regard to exploratory curriculum:

- *Articulate more clearly how exploratory courses are an integral and critical part of the middle school curriculum.* In many schools, the role and purpose of exploratory curricula are not understood even by a school's faculty and students. The exploratory function is too often viewed as an extra, taking away from the core curriculum.
- *Ensure that everyone understands that exploratory and academic are complementary, not competing or opposing concepts.* Exploratory courses or activities engage students in ways that core courses often do not. Certainly, a middle school curriculum that is totally exploratory—allowing students wide options from which to choose, different ways to view the world, and various opportunities to succeed—goes a long way to meet the needs of young adolescents.
- *Align exploratory offerings more closely with the regular curriculum.* Beane's (1993) suggestions for an integrative curriculum arising from students' questions and concerns about themselves and the larger world suggest a way to effectively and meaningfully integrate both core and exploratory offerings. For example, when students identify saving the environment as a focus for study, exploratory areas like health, technology, and art become part of the overall curriculum, joining language arts and science as tools to explore this complex issue.

Conclusion

Middle schools continue to embrace exploration as a guiding principle across the school curriculum. The importance of exploratory experiences in the middle school curriculum is supported by both practitioners and the limited research available. Where the middle school curriculum becomes more integrated and less subject centered, exploratory experiences play a pivotal role, as they are integrated into every aspect of schooling. Even in separate subject contexts, exploratory courses provide students with meaningful learning that directly relates to their known need for a wide variety of experiences.

For More Information

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